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Housing for seniors is studied

Projects in Ripon, Manteca and Mountain House offer options

By Rick Brewer

Record Staff Writer

Published Monday, February 21, 2005

Senior communities that are in various stages of development in Ripon, Manteca and Mountain House will attempt to provide housing options for older adults who may be looking to scale back their lifestyles.

Barbara Bickerton found an alternative to the lack of senior housing opportunities in Tracy. About a year and a half ago, Bickerton bought a house with her son, Peter.

The former New Jersey resident, who spends several hours daily at the Lolly Hansen Senior Center playing bridge and chatting with friends, sold her home back East to make the transition.

"I came to visit and liked the area," she said. "The prices in the Bay Area were too steep, but this worked out fine."

Bickerton's success in finding a suitable living space is an anomaly in Tracy, where only one apartment complex -- The Village Gardens on Ninth Street -- is dedicated to senior residents. The lengthy waiting list underscores the need for alternative living arrangements for a growing segment of the population -- empty nesters and other older adults who want to simplify their surroundings.

Senior housing is the broad term for a niche market inside the building industry. Potential buyers are adults 50 and older who are looking for spaces with less square footage than an average three-bed, two-bath house. They also are looking for relatively easy access to city services, such as bus lines, hospitals and senior service agencies.

"We're talking about the pre- and post-retiree who doesn't need assisted care but is ready to downsize," said Mike Schmidt, executive director of the Tracy Chamber of Commerce. "Maybe their kids are gone, and they don't want to live in a giant house anymore and take care of the yard work."

Right now, there aren't many options where this population can go.

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Tracy planner Victoria Lombardo said one recent application for residential growth allotments -- the precursor to building permits -- was for a 16-unit complex for active adults. Lombardo said the city does not require developers to address the housing needs of seniors; however, any project brought to the city that has an innovative approach to housing may stand a better chance of being approved.

"And I would say that that qualifies as an innovative approach," Lombardo said.

It's certainly not unheard of. In Manteca, Pulte Homes is nearing the end of an 18-month environmental review for a 1,425-home senior community on 365 acres northwest of Lathrop and Union roads. The project will be built by its Del Webb division -- the companies merged in 2001 -- and include tennis and bocce courts, a pool and activity center. The company has built its famous Sun City retirement communities in six states including Texas, Illinois, Nevada and Arizona. The closest Sun City community is in Lincoln.

In Mountain House, master developer Trimark Communities LLC recently received approval to build senior housing during its next phase of development.

In Ripon, the nonprofit Bethany Home Society of San Joaquin County is working on a 79-unit project of duplexes and apartments for seniors. If built, it will be located on the north side of West Main Street, near the society's current assisted-living facility and 131-unit senior apartment complex.

There is a long waiting list for those apartments, too, which is why the new facility is important for the community, Executive Director Andrew Lee said. But the project must be cost-effective for the company and its future tenants or Bethany won't pursue building it, he said.

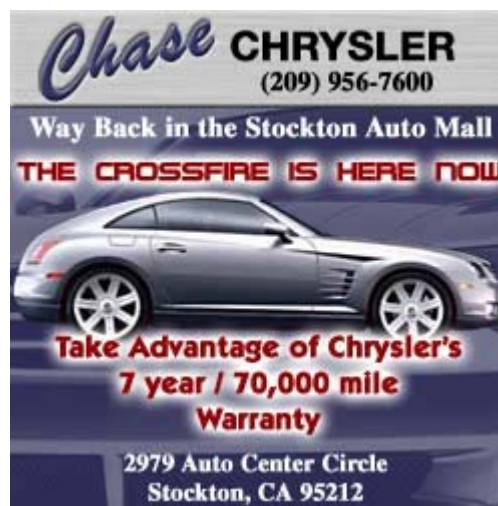
"A waiting list is worthless if no one is able to afford the units," Lee said.

Currently, it seems as if few companies are willing to provide the units -- despite an increasing number of seniors who might benefit from them.

Schmidt said the 65-and-over demographic has risen to 17 percent of Tracy's population, or 12,600 prospective buyers.

"As a nation and as a city, we haven't realized the potential market for this -- or the potential need," Schmidt said.

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